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The Ethics of the Ministry

By S. Z. BATTEN, D.D.

Secretary, Department of Social Education, American Baptist Publication Society,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

IT might be possible to make a brief article on this subject by saying that the ministry as a body has no code of professional ethics. This statement would be true enough if by a professional code we mean one that is formally accepted by all who are called ministers. There is for the ministry no formulated code defining conditions of membership and giving formal standards concerning professional conduct. Yet this statement, while true in form, would be far from the truth and would convey a wholly wrong impression. For the ministry as a body of men dedicated to a certain life and service, has very rigid standards by which men are pledged and their conduct is tested.

The various professions have their codes and standards. Why is it that the ministry, which is supposed to represent the highest ideals, has no such formulated and recognized code? The answer to this question will carry us a part of the way toward the answer to our larger question.

The ministry is regarded as a calling rather than a profession. Whatever may be the motives which induce men to enter the various other professions, such as medicine, law, teaching, engineering, or the various vocations, as business, banking, manufacturing or trade, there is but one motive that is supposed to be dominant in the ministry. Men in the ministry are expected to know the will of God, to interpret His truth to men, to be spokesmen for God and His cause in the world. "No man taketh this office on himself, but he that is called of God." Practically all religious bodies hold this conception; they therefore expect all who

would enter the ministry to have a valid call from God; they believe that this call is higher than any considerations of personal profit or pleasure. In these times at least, in practically every communion, a man who admitted or gave men reason to believe that he was actuated by selfish motives, would be sadly discredited. Theoretically, at least, he is a man set apart by a special call for a special work. We need not discuss the question how far the ministry as a body is true to this conception; nor need we here inquire how far the conduct of ministers in general justifies their high office. We are accounting for the fact that there is no formulated code of ethics for the ministry.

REASONS FOR LACK OF FORMAL CODE

It is felt that such a professional code of ethics would cast discredit upon the very idea of the ministry. It is expected also, by the very nature of their calling, that its practitioners will be men preëminent in all the virtues that are esteemed among men.

Then, as every one knows, the religious bodies are divided into many and divers denominations. Religious convictions or opinions, whichever word may be accepted, are probably the strongest in human nature and take precedence of all others. It follows, then, that religious divisions and differences are very strong and keep the churches apart. In some cases a religious body regards itself as the only true church, and hence regards all other bodies simply as sectarians, if not heretics. It is therefore impossible to bring together representatives of the stronger religious bodies for the full

and free discussion of any questions either of faith, polity or conduct. So in the medical profession there are several schools of medicine and, as every one knows, there is much criticism and rivalry. But all schools recognize certain obligations toward patients and certain methods of procedure. Thus while each religious body has, nevertheless, its own standards and codes, all of these are high and right.

In every body with any such thing as a recognized ministry, there is some ordination service. At this time there is careful scrutiny of the candidate's life, his call to the ministry, his fitness for the work, his ability to adorn the calling to which he is set apart. In all of these bodies there is some supervisory official, Bishop, Presbytery or Council, that may be asked to pass upon the man's life or conduct when in the ministry. When any charges are circulated against him he may be investigated and called to account, and, if found guilty of conduct unbecoming a gentleman and a clergyman, he may be warned, deposed and unfrocked. An unworthy or immoral man may continue for a time; but every one familiar with the inside history of churches knows that in practically every case such conduct brings the revocation of his ordination and his expulsion from the ministry.

As every one knows, and as must be admitted with regret, some ministers do wrong and a few are convicted as criminals. But all this is also testimony to the high standards of the ministry. Perhaps, in proportion to numbers, more ministers are unfrocked than there are lawyers disbarred. But, be it understood, ministers are unfrocked for private conduct, which does not enter into account against an attorney. No man can long continue in the ministry of any religious body who is known to be immoral in sex matters.

The standards of the ministry include the personal and private life; whereas, professional codes deal primarily with professional conduct. The professions expel a member whose professional conduct brings reproach upon the professions. The churches discipline men whose private lives are known to be immoral or unworthy.

One other reason may be mentioned why the ministry has not formulated a code of professional ethics. The churches that bear the Christian name have been given some definite principles which cover practically all of the points of a code; and these principles are accepted as authoritative and final. In the New Testament, and especially in the letters of the Apostle Paul to Timothy and to Titus, we have some very definite instructions concerning the ministry. These charges deal with the minister's life and conduct as a man, a husband and father. They define his qualifications in personal character, in aptness to teach, in general deportment. They deal explicitly with his studies, his work as preacher and pastor; they indicate also the motives that are to determine his life and service. These writings, it may be said, are accepted as authoritative by churches and pastors. In view of this, it seems almost needless to attempt any formal and elaborate statement of professional ethics.

In the theological seminaries students for the ministry receive very careful instruction in ministerial ethics. Unfortunately in some bodies a considerable proportion of ministers do not receive any adequate theological and collegiate training. Yet, as I have stated, all churches and ministers accept the writings of the apostles as authoritative. And so it is that all ministers have definite instructions, regarded as inspired, which contain all of the essentials of a professional code.

Thus far we have considered the reasons why the ministry has no professional code of ethics. In so doing we have noted, also, that all religious bodies are exacting in their demands so far as the personal lives of ministers are concerned. There are, however, other facts that must be taken into account in dealing with the ministry as a profession.

Professional codes are designed by the members of the profession themselves and have several definite objects. These objects, as I understand, are intended to maintain the standing and dignity of the profession, to prevent the entrance of the unfit and ill qualified, to provide for the expulsion of any whose conduct brings the profession into reproach and to regulate the conduct of its members in their relations to their patrons and toward the public. So far as the ministry is concerned, it has no formal code covering these points. Yet it has an unwritten code covering these and other points; and some aspects of this may be noted.

SAFEGUARDING THE ENTRANCE

By the nature of the case, such professions as law, medicine, teaching and engineering, demand some specialized training. We grant that the ministry by its very nature, as the interpreter of an authoritative Book and the instructor of the people, requires a large amount of special training. Yet there are many types of service in the ministry, and while adequate collegiate training may be essential for some men, it is not so essential for others. The church must keep a door open for men who have a special call or exceptional ability. In some bodies the educational standards are high and exacting. In other bodies some of the most successful and honored men have had little if any collegiate training.

MAINTAINING THE STANDING AND DIGNITY OF THE PROFESSION. NOBLESSE OBLIGE

There are certain obligations implied in rank, and these are among the finer things of life. Men who have any conception of the meaning of the ministry are quite likely to conduct themselves with decorum and dignity. The ministry by the nature of the case represents the highest ethical and social ideals. This is especially the case with reference to children and the weak, and, even more markedly, in its attitude toward women. Few men are subject to as many special and subtle temptations as ministers. Occasionally one fails and falls. And yet ministers as a body are most careful here to avoid every appearance of evil and to maintain the same attitude toward all.

THE SERVICE MOTIVE

In many, if not all of the professional codes, the idea of service is placed in the very forefront. Members are taught to think of themselves as public servants; and the motive of mere profit or advantage is discouraged. The medical and teaching professions have high standards here. Any discovery that one makes must not be capitalized for one's own profit but must be given to the public. The teacher or physician who patents some discovery or invention is guilty of unprofessional conduct and is usually treated either as a quack or a mere patent medicine vender.

No class of men do as much unpaid service as ministers. Day and night they are ready to respond to the call of sorrow or need. The minister who is suspected of looking after his own financial advantage and forgetting to serve the people, soon is found out and is fatally discredited. Any person of large experience can point to at least one minister who because of his selfish

or non-serving spirit has been discredited and has dropped out of the ministry. Judged by the achievements of business men, physicians and lawyers, there are no large financial successes in the ministry. In one of the larger religious bodies with some eleven thousand ministers, there are not five ministers who receive salaries of ten thousand dollars a year. The minister has forever surrendered the hope of being rich. Of course, like every man, he wants an adequate support for his family and some of the comforts of life. But the hope of money reward does not determine his calling, his acceptance of a field, the conduct of his work. More than that, it is expected that he will give his undivided attention to his life's calling. The minister who is carrying side lines for profit and seeking to get rich, is immediately and fatally discredited.

PROTECTING THE PROFESSION

The old principle, long ago enunciated by the Apostle Paul, has a wide application. If one member suffer, all the other members suffer with him; and if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with him. It is right and proper that in every profession men should regard the "honor of the profession," should protect one another and defend any who are unjustly attacked. Every profession must be judged by its usual practices and its better members. No profession should be condemned for the exceptional conduct of the least representative members. Yet every one has known instances where "professional ethics has shielded the unethical conduct of men." Professional ethics has kept the lips of physicians closed when they should have warned the ignorant. Ministers, like all other self-respecting men, hold sacred, confidential information and personal confessions. Very seldom

indeed does one prove faithless here. Yet ministers who are fully faithful find that ethical standards require them very often to counsel people and sometimes warn the innocent. They would consider it unethical to be silent while great wrong was being done.

PROFESSIONAL HONESTY

In all of the professions men are expected to deal frankly and honestly with clients. The high-minded business man will correctly label his goods and will not sell for good wool, material that he knows is poor shoddy. He will not take advantage of his customers to overcharge for any article. The physician is expected to deal fairly with his patient. He will not convey a false impression nor will he keep a man sick to increase his bill. The conscientious attorney will not attempt to deceive the court or the jury. Of course every man is presumed to be innocent till he is proved guilty; and every man is entitled to a fair trial. But professional ethics forbids pettifogging and deception.

Here we touch a tender nerve in the minister's life. The modern minister, some one has said, is like a man walking among eggs. He has to do with all kinds of people, bad, weak, good, better, best. He is the interpreter of truths which sweep the range of life and make the highest demands of men. He is expected to show men their sins and failings, to warn the unruly, to charge men who are going wrong to repent and change their ways. His very calling requires him to make men know the whole will of God and to guide men's feet into the paths of justice and truth.

There is a subtle temptation here which few appreciate. It is easy for the minister to "accept a situation" and be silent lest he stir up trouble. It is easy for him to prophesy "smooth

things" in order to keep everybody pleased. It is easy for him to denounce unpopular sins, as wife beating, and to pass over the popular sins of people. It is easy to thunder on the minor sins and get a reputation for brave outspokenness, and to soft pedal on the major sins, such as economic oppression and commercial injustice.

Ministers are men and are subject to the limitations of men. Few are men of great ability; fewer still are men of keen insight. But most are men of sincerity and honestly endeavor to deal fairly with the truth. Now and then we find a minister who sells the truth to serve the hour. But I have known thousands of ministers, many of them fully and intimately, and it is my conviction that there is very little paltering with the truth, very little cowardice, still less, "huckstering the Gospel" to serve one's gain. If a man is unknown and unpopular there may be a temptation to win people's favor. If he has become popular with a large following, there is a temptation upon him to flatter the crowd. But in the main standards are high and ministers speak the truth as they see it, come what will.

There is probably no place where sincerity and inner probity are so much needed. Jesus might have made a bargain with the devil, and not a man in His day would ever have known it. The minister today might dim the inner light and serve his own interests without any one's suspecting it. Under these circumstances a formal code of professional ethics would have little meaning or value. The true minister's loyalty must be to an inner standard, to an unseen master, to the applause of his own conscience.

PROFESSIONAL COURTESY

"Every calling, trade or profession has, of course, a strong tendency toward a professional or class con-

sciousness. It naturally secretes and crystallizes a professional or commercial code of ethics, a system of taboo and etiquette, which is likely to become a substitute for the fundamental and vital principles of morality and righteousness." These words of Bishop Williams point out a danger which besets all men and especially the minister. In every calling, trade or profession there is a tendency for men of each school, business, or group, to flock together and view every question from the point of view of their particular class. Ministers are probably as free from blame here as any class of men; yet not all are above reproach.

In our modern world we have many religious bodies all competing together for the allegiance of the people. Naturally enough men of each communion believe that they have the essential truth of the Gospel; they may not believe that others are all wrong, but they do believe that "we" are most nearly right. Competition in church matters is keen; the church that would prosper must "be up and doing."

The time was when church competition was more intense and less kindly. The time was when ministers of one body had little in common with those of other bodies. But a remarkable change has come in this respect. In practically every city there is a Union Ministers' Conference, where ministers meet to express their brotherly spirit and to consider their common work. The time has gone by when men of one communion disfellowship and denounce those of other communions.

In the trades and professions there are professional codes regulating the conduct of men. It is unprofessional in a physician to advertise his cures or to claim to be a cure-all. It is unprofessional in a merchant to misbrand his goods or to discredit others in the same line of trade. In the same way it is

unprofessional in the minister to resort to sensational and unfair methods in advertising his preaching or his church. In nearly every city there is some one minister who has a large congregation and a popular hearing. So long as he is fair and brotherly all others rejoice in his popularity and prosperity. There is far less professional jealousy than one might suppose.

In practically all of the Protestant bodies, church life and government is becoming ever more democratic. Each congregation as a rule expresses its own preference and calls its own minister. This gives opportunity for intrigue, for clerical narrowness, for professional jealousy to assert themselves. To illustrate: A church is about to call a minister and has some names before it. As a rule the various aspirants for the place are perfectly fair; no one seeks to discredit others in order to enhance his own chances. It sometimes happens, however, that people of one school of doctrine raise questions and spread reports concerning the candidate's soundness in the faith. I have known a number of excellent men who have been undermined in this way. But it is only narrow bigots who resort to such practices; no reputable minister would countenance them.

One other thing: When a minister is

changing pastorates there are certain ethical standards to be observed. Ministers are very restless and many are looking around for a "better" or a "larger" field. It is not regarded as ethical for a minister to coquet with some other call or to seek a call to some other church in order that he may be asked to remain in his present field at a larger salary. It is hardly ethical for a clergyman to accept a call to some other field till he has first conferred with officers of his present church. Of course every real man wants to do the largest work possible; and every minister desires an adequate income for his family. But the question of salary is seldom the first consideration. It is unethical to be looking out primarily for a larger salary. The minister who is believed to be doing this is soon discounted by his fellow ministers and is fatally discredited among the churches.

Jesus of Nazareth, it has been finely said, was the world's perfect gentleman. They who are called to be His followers and ministers of His grace, are expected to be like their Master. Many fail; humility compels us all to confess that we fall below our ideal. But my experience and observation teach me that ministers as a class maintain high ideals and live up to a fine code of professional ethics.

Ethics in the Public Service Proposals for a Public Service Code

By WILLIAM C. BEYER

Assistant Director, Bureau of Municipal Research of Philadelphia

AS our already extensive public service continues to grow and to absorb a larger and larger proportion of the workers of the country, we shall become increasingly concerned, not

only with the conditions under which public servants are employed, but also with the ethics and ideals that govern their conduct. A public service, the members of which are not guided by